

## Germany, the EU and Global Britain: so near, yet so far; how to link "Global Britain" to European foreign and security policy

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# SWP Comment

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## Germany, the EU and Global Britain: So Near, Yet So Far

How to Link “Global Britain” to European Foreign and Security Policy

*Claudia Major and Nicolai von Ondarza*

**Under the narrative of “Global Britain”, the United Kingdom (UK) aims to position itself after Brexit as an independent leading power with global reach. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, published in March 2021, seeks to implement this goal. By making the G7 and COP26 presidencies in 2021 a success and by increasing its defence spending, London wants to show what Global Britain means in practice, while also convincing the new US administration of its strategic value. With regard to the European Union (EU), however, the Johnson government rejects institutionalised cooperation in foreign and security policy and prefers flexible formats with individual EU states. This presents Germany with a dilemma: On the one hand, it wants to involve London in European foreign and security policy, but on the other hand, this involvement must not be at the expense of the EU and European unity. In view of the currently strained EU-UK relationship, institutionalised cooperation only seems possible in the long term. In the medium term, the focus should be on informal bilateral and multilateral formats.**

After a difficult divorce, the UK has comprehensively separated from the EU. Although a complete break in the form of a “no-deal Brexit” was prevented, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), concluded at the end of December 2020, seals a hard Brexit between the EU and the UK. New trade barriers have been erected, and the difficult situation in Northern Ireland has already led to further political tensions between the UK and the EU.

At the same time, many elements call for close cooperation with London in foreign

and security policy: geographical proximity; shared values, interests, and challenges; membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and other international organisations; (still) close economic ties; as well as cultural and personal relations. A major challenge for the German government is thus to closely associate London into European foreign and security policy without damaging the EU in the process.



## Self-promotion As a Global Leader

Then-Prime Minister Theresa May had already launched the narrative of Global Britain to frame post-Brexit British foreign policy (SWP-Comment 24/2018). Her successor, Boris Johnson, wants to assert the UK as an independent global leader after Brexit.

With the Integrated Review, the Johnson government concretised its idea of Global Britain in March 2021. It builds upon four main aspects: 1) a more active use of partnerships and alliances, 2) the UK's role as a "global champion of free and fair trade", 3) an independent foreign policy that integrates research and development, development cooperation, and "soft power", 4) a security and defence policy with global reach.

The level of ambition of Global Britain is (rhetorically) high: The UK sees itself as a "game changer nation", "an even stronger force for good in the world", and a "science and tech superpower". After leaving the EU, it wants to take independent decisions on international issues — for example, as a pioneer against climate change — and also be an agenda setter, such as when it imposed swift sanctions against Belarus in the summer of 2020.

### A global foreign policy

The UK government is building its Global Britain ambition first on the UK's ongoing excellent foreign policy network. Due to Brexit, London loses direct access to the EU, and thus no longer participates in the regular exchanges of EU heads of state and government, foreign ministers, or at the working level. Yet, by global standards, London maintains a privileged position in international diplomacy. It remains a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power, a member of the G7/G20, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe, NATO, and in flexible formats such as the E3. Internationally, it has one of the largest diplomatic networks. In addition, it has tra-

ditionally close relations with the United States (US) and, within the framework of the "Five Eyes", with Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

The biggest contradictions in the Integrated Review, however, are political. For example, the Johnson government has decided to cut the budget for development assistance from 0.7 per cent to 0.5 per cent of GDP. This weakens the British soft power and reliability emphasised in the Integrated Review in a central area and contradicts the narrative of Global Britain's worldwide and comprehensive commitment. Moreover, in the Integrated Review, the UK proclaims the goal to strengthen multilateralism but it leaves out the EU as a partner. However, many of the UK's goals will require cooperation not only with European states, but also with the EU, such as in the area of sanctions.

### Independent network of trade agreements

A separate network of global trade agreements is to form the second pillar. One of the main reasons why Boris Johnson opted for a hard Brexit (and twice voted against Theresa May's withdrawal agreement) was the goal for the UK to negotiate its own trade agreements. Outside of the EU, London can no longer throw the weight of the EU's internal market into the balance when negotiating trade agreements, but as the world's sixth-largest economy, it is convinced that it can get agreements that are better tailored to the British economy. Additionally, London wants to strengthen the World Trade Organization and the multilateral trading system.

In practice, the British government has successfully translated most existing EU trade agreements into its own arrangements. In consequence, about 57 per cent of the UK's own exports in goods (as of 2019) are now covered by some form of trade agreement. However, the TCA with the EU covers 46 per cent of British exports in goods — an area where trading has become significantly more difficult due to Brexit — and all other

new trade agreements account for only slightly more than 11 per cent, for example Japan, South Korea, and Canada. Looking ahead, the UK is in negotiation with, among others, the US, India, Australia as well as in talks for the UK to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). If all of these efforts were successful, they would cover another 30 per cent of UK exports in goods. The CPTPP, in particular, is indeed different to the EU and would complement the UK's symbolic military engagement in the Indo-Pacific with a trade policy element.

However, these are relative successes since, with very few deviations, they are “rollover agreements” of those already negotiated with the EU. So far, the UK has not concluded any agreements beyond what it already had as an EU member. Moreover, the EU remains by far the most important trading partner. On balance, trade from the UK to the world has thus become more restricted since Brexit due to a massive increase in new bureaucracy and non-tariff trade barriers facing UK exporters to the EU.

## A sovereign foreign policy

The third pillar of “Global Britain” foresees independent foreign policy initiatives. All EU member states pursue their own independent foreign and security policies; yet, since leaving the EU in January 2020, the British government has aimed to explicitly differentiate itself from its EU partners by pursuing its own priorities.

First, this is visible with regard to China. For example, the British parliament has imposed a ban on the installation of Huawei 5G infrastructure from September 2021 onward. Following China's crackdown on its former colony of Hong Kong, London has offered visas with the prospect of British citizenship to all Hong Kong residents. With an eye on the Biden administration, London wants to show toughness towards China and is positioning itself as the most important European partner to the US.

At the same time, London outlines a “balanced” approach in the Integrated

Review, according to which China is a systemic challenger and the “biggest state-based threat to the UK's economic security”, but which also recognises that China and the UK benefit from bilateral trade and investment and that China needs to be on board for global challenges such as climate change. Thus, like the EU, London wants to combine cooperation and competition with China. For example, in parallel to the EU, it imposed sanctions on China in March 2021 based on human rights violations, while also remaining interested in a trade agreement similar to the China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.

Second, under the narrative of a tilt to the Indo-Pacific, the UK aims to increase its political, economic, and military engagement in the region. For instance, a Director-General for Indo-Pacific was created in the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) in 2020. In 2021, the British aircraft carrier *Queen Elizabeth* will be deployed to the Indo-Pacific. The aspiration to join the CPTPP completes the picture.

Finally, the UK is hosting in 2021 the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow and holds the G7 presidency. In climate issues, the UK has every right to present itself as a pioneer, having formulated stricter climate targets than the EU, which, although it has long championed strict international climate targets, still falls behind the UK in this area. Together with the UN, it wants to negotiate a major breakthrough in international climate policy in Glasgow under British leadership. Within the G7 presidency, London is also emphasising its sovereign global role. Her Majesty's Government is increasingly using the G7 as a foreign policy forum, for example with invitations to Australia, India, and South Korea as well as with the joint declarations of the G7 foreign ministers — including the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy — for example on Myanmar, Hong Kong, or the Russian military build-up on the border with Ukraine.

With these initiatives, London aims to position a sovereign, agile Global Britain as a positive alternative to its caricature of the

EU as ponderous and inflexible. Seemingly, for post-Brexit British foreign policy, stronger global influence from London and close cooperation with the EU would be mutually exclusive. Although this narrative seems convincing at the rhetorical level, it is practically untenable. Engagements such as initiatives in the G7 presidency or coordinated human rights sanctions against China would all have been possible within the framework of the EU. Instead, not being an EU member — in addition to the current dysfunctional relationship with the Union — weakens London's room for manoeuvre as a self-declared champion of multilateralism. From technology regulation to climate change, British priorities would be easier to achieve with the EU than without it, let alone against it.

### **A global security and defence actor**

Security and defence policy is a fourth central area for London to underline its aspirations for global leadership. It aims to strengthen existing alliances, launch new cooperation initiatives, expand its international presence, and modernise its armed forces. London is focussing on global deployability with an emphasis on maritime capabilities, digitalisation, and the integration of new technologies.

The strengthening of alliances mainly concerns transatlantic relations and NATO. London insists even more strongly on NATO (rather than the EU) as the primary forum for military political coordination. However, this needs to be accentuated with a certain British tendency towards bi- (for instance with France) and multilateral formats (such as the UK Joint Expeditionary Force). In fact, the recently decided expansion of the navy, the focus on new technologies, and the “tilt” towards the Indo-Pacific do not follow a logic that was coordinated with NATO, but rather an uncoordinated sovereign prioritisation. Moreover, London wants to increase its international presence and agility and intensify partnerships outside of Europe

as a sign of its global outlook; above all with the states of the Five Eyes; with Singapore, Australia, Malaysia, and New Zealand in the Five Powers Defence Arrangement; but also with other ASEAN states, Japan, South Korea, and India, as well as with partners in the Middle East and Africa.

The UK has the world's fourth-largest defence budget (according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies), meets NATO's 2 per cent defence spending target, the 20 per cent investment target, and in November 2020 increased the defence budget by an extraordinary £16.5 billion over the next four years. The current £41.5 billion defence budget is expected to grow by 0.5 per cent above inflation each year. However, there is still a substantial funding gap in the 2020–2030 equipment plan.

This increase of the defence budget is also a signal to Washington that London wants to remain militarily relevant and a leader in Europe. In addition to increasing the ceiling for nuclear warheads for its nuclear deterrent and expansion of its navy, the UK wants to improve its cyber and space capabilities and integrate new technologies into the armed forces. At the same time, the Euro-Atlantic engagement is to remain a priority (at least in the medium term): According to the Integrated Review, Russia is the “most acute” threat. In the long term, however, the Pacific region will become crucial.

The Integrated Review and its military implementation (“Defence in a Competitive Age”) only partially answer several questions. First, even with the increase in the defence budget, the UK will not be able to act on its own globally; the British aircraft carrier in the Indo-Pacific, for example, requires a US escort. The global outlook could also lead to a reduction in capabilities that, according to NATO, are needed in Europe, for instance land forces. The army is to be cut from a planned 82,000 to 72,500 personnel in 2025 (SWP-Aktuell 101/2020). With the tilt to Asia, London is gaining global visibility militarily, but its presence there does not have the same strategic influence that its military capabilities have

for Europe's defence, where they (still) play a key role.

## **Rejection of the EU As a Foreign Policy Partner and Actor**

So far, the British government has rejected foreign and security policy cooperation with the EU. Although cooperation with individual EU states, particularly France and Germany, has been largely successfully decoupled from Brexit, cooperation with the EU as an institution has suffered significantly. In January 2020, Prime Minister Johnson signed the (legally non-binding) political declaration on future EU-UK relations together with the withdrawal agreement. Among other things, it stated the goal of a close "security partnership". This was to include regular exchanges in foreign, security, and defence policy; coordination on sanctions; and the participation of the UK in Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations.

Nothing of this remained in the negotiation of the future 2020 relationship. A few days after signing the political declaration, the British government published its negotiating mandate, in which it no longer envisaged institutionalised cooperation with the EU in the field of foreign and security policy. The word "defence" and references to cooperation in this area were missing. Subsequently, although a supplementary agreement on the exchange of confidential information was attached to the TCA, cooperation in foreign and security policy is entirely missing. There are no plans for an exchange on these issues in the EU-UK institutions created by the TCA, such as the EU-UK Partnership Council. Although US Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently attended the EU Council of Foreign Ministers as a guest, London rejects this form of cooperation.

In the Integrated Review, London also omits the EU as a partner in foreign and security policy; it is mentioned only as a partner in climate policy. Moreover, the FCDO has denied the EU ambassador in

London diplomatic recognition, arguing that this would set a precedent for other international organisations. This is not very convincing, especially since not only do all the other third countries with EU delegations (140 of them) recognise their ambassadors, but the UK also worked with the EEAS until it left the EU. In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2021, Boris Johnson outlined a "Global Britain" that advocates the strengthening of the West and the multilateral world order, but in which the EU does not feature in foreign and security policy.

The outlook for defence policy is similarly bleak. The EU offered the UK to participate in CSDP operations or projects of the Permanent Structured Cooperation under the regular conditions of third countries. Even the US is now seeking the latter. The British government, however, has rejected all possibilities.

## **The British-European divide**

The British change of position in foreign and security policy with the EU can be largely explained by its domestic political dynamics. Here, the hard Brexiteers prevailed in 2019. After taking office, Boris Johnson filled his cabinet exclusively with Brexiteers, who, like Foreign Minister Dominic Raab, had spent their political careers fighting for Brexit. Although the EU is of such central importance in trade policy and internal security that the UK will inevitably have to come to terms with it, the Union remains weak in foreign, security, and, above all, defence policy.

London is therefore counting on being able to bypass the EU in this area, largely without consequences, and instead coordinate directly on a bilateral and multilateral basis, especially with France, Germany, and, to a lesser extent, Poland and the Nordic states. This focus on alternative, more flexible formats can be interpreted as an attempt to further weaken the EU in foreign and security policy. This not only misses an opportunity for urgently needed positive cooperation between the EU and

the UK, but it also increases the risk of Europeans being divided by third parties such as Russia, China, or in particular cases even the US. Moreover, non-coordinated actions such as sanctions lose part of their effectiveness. This also creates the risk that the UK will slowly but surely drift from its European partners in foreign and security policy.

However, the EU is also a difficult partner with regard to defining foreign and security policy cooperation with the UK. The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is at odds with bilateralisation, cherry picking, and the exclusive use of flexible formats. The EU mandate for future relations, while aiming at cooperation in this area, emphasised above all preserving the EU's "decision-making autonomy". The UK was only offered participation options in EU decisions as a regular third country, comparable to Norway, which is hardly compatible with the UK's foreign and security policy weight and its self-image.

## Possible Formats

As a consequence, cooperation between the UK and EU countries in foreign and security policy currently takes place primarily in flexible formats. These can be used by Germany and others in their mutual interest of keeping London within the European framework on international issues, of preventing external attempts at division, and at the same time maintaining links to the EU. The following formats are the most promising.

The currently much-discussed **E3 format** of France, the UK, and Germany originated in 2003 during the negotiations on the nuclear agreement held with Iran, but it had lost visibility thereafter. Since 2016, its importance has increased: It is seen as a way to ensure foreign policy coordination between the three big European countries despite Brexit, to give impetus to the weak CFSP, and to coordinate the difficult interactions with former US President Donald Trump. Meetings became more frequent,

the range of topics broadened (beyond EU issues: from the South China Sea to the poisoning of former agent Sergei Skripal), defence ministers also met, and partners were involved. The E3 format allows London to be linked to EU decisions without an institutional agreement and to coordinate positions (beyond EU issues) and joint action.

However, non-involved EU states fear an exclusive and non-transparent format that threatens to undermine European unity, fails to take into account the interests of other states, or even dictates decisions as a directorate. To counter these fears, the nuclear negotiations with Iran were linked to the EU through the strong role of the High Representative, but he has been missing in the most recent revitalisation. It is also important to prevent London from labelling a successful E3 as a failure of EU foreign policy and from fuelling the rejection to work directly with the EU.

In terms of results and acceptance, an issue-specific temporary extension of the E3 seems to be the most promising approach: E3+X. When debating the Eastern neighbourhood, Poland could participate, for example. For EU-NATO cooperation, E3 + NATO Secretary General + EU High Representative would make sense. Berlin and Paris should also push to associate the High Representative in order to strengthen the EU's legitimacy. He could represent the interests of the EU and act as a "watchdog" for the positions of the other EU states.

**The Quad** — in this case Germany, France, the UK, plus the US — has worked well in the past at the level of the political directors to ensure information exchange and coordination. Since US Secretary of State Blinken took office, the four foreign ministers have also met several times in a Quad formation, for example on Iran, Myanmar, and China.

As with the E3, the challenge for the Quad is that other EU states are criticising their lack of participation, most notably Italy, Poland, and Spain. They rightly point out that on certain issues, they can bring as much or more influence or expertise to bear



as the E3, for example with regard to the Southern neighbourhood. The US has long avoided the term “Quad” for fear of such complaints. London’s focus on the E3 and Quad seems to point to a British understanding of politics that relies on the US and large states instead of looking for relevant actors on an issue-by-issue basis. Berlin should not adopt this interpretation. Rather, it should insist on a temporary, issue-specific expansion of the Quad, as in the case of the E3, therefore ensuring the inclusion of the interests of the partners and the EU.

At the global level, the **G7** is another flexible format for coordinating foreign and security policy. London is using the format for that function during its 2021 G7 presidency, an approach that the new administration in Washington eventually supported. The advantage here is that the EU is already a G7 member, and the High Representative was also involved in the G7 Foreign Ministers’ Declarations. After the UK, Germany will take over the G7 presidency in 2022 and could continue to use the format for foreign and security policy.

**NATO** remains the central military policy forum for European and transatlantic coordination. It is in the mutual interest of Germany and the UK to keep Britain as a strong and reliable partner in the Alliance. From a German perspective, EU defence initiatives support NATO obligations and increase Europe’s capacity to act. NATO-EU cooperation should thus be used to link the UK with EU defence. However, attempts to undermine EU defence initiatives or to play off the EU and NATO against each other must be prevented.

In parallel, Germany should strive for **bilateral coordination** with London where it suits its own interests and strengthen it through regular exchanges. For example, bilateral and minilateral talks with the UK could be used to flank EU decisions on sanctions. London has sought closer bilateral relations since the Brexit referendum, not least because it assumed that Berlin can significantly influence EU negotiations (and EU policies in general).

Germany, on the other hand, has made a point of prioritising cooperation with the EU-27 and preventing the impression that bilateral cooperation could undermine EU cooperation. The German government wanted to avoid weakening the EU, straining the deteriorated relations with the UK any further, and being taken in by a British narrative that presents a false dichotomy between a toxic EU and positive bilateral relations.

Now that Brexit has been completed, Germany should be more open towards intensifying bilateral cooperation with London, including signing the long-planned joint declaration on foreign and security policy. Particularly in this realm, the EU’s decision-making autonomy is hardly at risk. Rather, both Germany and the EU have an interest in coordinating with London, as long as this takes place in addition to EU coordination, and not instead of it.

#### **Ad hoc coordination with the EU:**

Finally, Germany should work to ensure that all flexible possibilities for EU-UK coordination are explored, despite the difficult relationship between the EU and the UK. A model here could be, of all things, the increasing coordination with the US. Just like the visits of the US president and the Secretary of State to the European Council and the Council of Foreign Ministers, the British foreign minister could be invited for consultations on dealing with Russia or on how to proceed in the Indo-Pacific. Such ad hoc formats could gradually restore trust and underline the benefits of mutual coordination on specific issues without restricting EU decision-making autonomy or British sovereignty.

### **Conflicting Goals in View of Future Cooperation**

Linking the UK in EU foreign, security, and defence policy cooperation presents Germany in particular with several dilemmas. Two interests have become contradictory due to Brexit and must now be balanced: On the one hand, the UK remains an im-



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portant partner with whom Germany shares many interests, values, and challenges; on the other hand, Britain's ideologically driven fundamental rejection of foreign and security policy cooperation with the EU is currently complicating coordination immensely. As long as the British government fundamentally rejects cooperation with the EU, partners such as Germany and France will be forced to choose between coordination in the EU and bilateral or multilateral cooperation with the UK. In view of the hardened positions, these conflicting goals will almost certainly not be solved in the short term.

*In the medium term*, therefore, "ad hocism" and cooperation in smaller formats (such as the E3) will dominate. Informal contacts between the UK and the EU – as well as between the UK and individual EU states – will have to suffice, as will issue-based coordination in the case of common interests, such as on sanctions. However, the difficult EU-UK relationship also limits bilateral cooperation, because the more the EU-UK conflict escalates – for example on Northern Ireland or vaccine distribution – the more difficult it will be for Germany and other EU states, such as Ireland, to maintain normal relations with London. At the same time, successful cooperation in the medium term (for instance in the E3 or bilaterally) can create reliable working relationships, (re-)build trust, and produce positive results, thus establishing the foundation for long-term institutionalised cooperation. Germany should encourage all other EU states and lead by example so that they mutually inform each other about bilateral cooperation with the UK to prevent them from being played off one another by London.

Thematically, there is significant agreement between the EU as a whole, Germany, and the UK on most of the foreign policy dossiers. Cooperation is possible and desirable, for example on COP26, Iran, and Russia. In a few areas, however, the potential for conflict is high, especially with

regard to trade policy, regulatory issues, and pandemic-related topics (vaccines). These issues, however, threaten to dominate the current strained relationship, as the present conflict over the Northern Ireland Protocol shows.

The *long-term goal* should be a normalisation and institutionalisation of EU-UK relations. However, this would require greater openness on the part of the EU, a change in London's political position, a more successful EU foreign policy that makes the Union a more attractive partner, or a change in the international security situation that requires increased cooperation. The super-election year of 2024, in which the US, the UK, and the EU will vote and potentially reposition themselves, could pave the way for a qualitatively new EU-UK relationship.

Until then, Germany should focus on ensuring close coordination with London through regular exchanges in bilateral and minilateral formats as well as NATO, but it should place these at the service of strengthening the EU's foreign and security policy. Any attempts by London to use smaller formats against the EU or play EU states off each other – thus weakening or disparaging the Union – must be resisted. Medium-term cooperation, therefore, explicitly includes a management of expectations that cooperation with London risks being difficult for the foreseeable future.

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